

Anyone who lives in Blawenburg will be quick to tell you where Blawenburg got its name. "Those guys," they might say. "The ones that started the mill. The Blaws." Well, that's almost right. One man, John Blaw (1677 – 1757), who came to Montgomery Township by way of Brooklyn, knew a good deal when he saw one. He heard about some land that was for sale in some good farming country, so he purchased 495 acres on the south side of what is now Blawenburg. He split this parcel between his sons. Michael took the eastern side of what is now Great Road and Frederick took the western side. Michael built a mill and we presume that Frederick ran a farm.

Most people around Blawenburg in those days were yeoman farmers; that is, they owned the land and worked their own farms. They all needed the services of a mill to turn their wheat, rye, and corn into flour. We aren't sure if Michael had any experience in either building a mill or running one, but he went for it. He found the power to turn the milling wheel in the waters of Bedens Brook. If you've looked at Bedens Brook on a dry summer day, you probably wonder how anyone could get enough water to power the mill. People were very resourceful when they had to do everything for themselves, so Blaw probably built a sluice gate that used brook water to turn a wheel that turned the mill stone to grind the grist that became flour.



*This grist mill is not Michael Blaw's, but the same principles are used to turn the water wheel to power the millstone. This is the Glade Creek Grist Mill in West Virginia.
Photo credit: Gabor Eszes, Creative Commons license*

So, it was just a guy, one guy, Michael Blaw, who ran the mill that gave notoriety to the name Blaw. As the family were early residents to the community, we're sure that father John, brother Fredrick, and a host of offspring also helped to lend credence to the name.

The Blaws, Blues, and Other Names

All names have meanings which may or may not reflect the people who hold them. In Dutch, Blaw means blue...the color, not the mood. Blauw is another Dutch spelling for the word blue. In Scottish, the verb blow means to blow and as a noun, it refers to a person who operates bellows to keep the fires going. A German form of the same word is spelled Blau, but it still means blue.

When they came to America, many of the Blaws, Blaus, and Blauws changed their name to its meaning in English – Blue. If you look at the genealogy of the Blaw name, you start to see lots of people named Blue in the family line. John Blaw, the first of the Blaws to settle in this area, Anglicanized his name when he remarried and went by John Blue. It was not uncommon to see offspring of the same family with some named Blaw and others named Blue. It must have been very hard to keep up with the Blaws and the Blues. We don't think that the Blues Brothers came from Blawenburg.

If you stop by Blawenburg Church, you will notice that the walls are blue, not white or some other color. This is no accident. When the congregation wanted to refurbish the church more than forty years ago, they covered the cracked plaster walls with blue wall fabric in honor of the Blaw name.

While many villages and geographical features are named after people, not all are. Locally, Harlingen is named after a beloved pastor, Rev. Johannes Van Harlingen. Belle Mead derived its name in part from its looks. Belle Mead means beautiful meadow. Some stories suggest that Belle Mead was named after the daughter of a U. S. Senator John McPherson in honor of his daughter Edna Belle Mead McPherson. Skillman takes its name from the Skillman family who settled in Montgomery Township many years ago. Rocky Hill was named for the hill just east of it, the rocky one. And then there's Sourland Mountain, a place where the soil was not as conducive to farming as the valley below it. Not a great name, but it accurately depicts the land.



*A scenic spot on Sourland Mountain. Great for hiking, not so great for farming.
Photo credit: Wolfenotes.com*

Blawenburg's Several Spellings

Blawenburg had several different names along the way. It wasn't because the name was changed. More likely, it was because people heard the name differently. For example, the minutes of the Dutch Reformed Church at Harlingen say that James Lake from Blaunborough talked with their Consistory (Board) in 1802 to petition them to allow Blawenburg to build a church. They rejected the idea. Maybe they didn't like the spelling of the name!

Other spellings include Blauenburgh, Blawenburgh, Blawenbirk, and who knows what else. In education, these many renditions of the same name are called inventive spelling. You spell it like you hear it!

The first known use of the word Blawenburg in print was in the 1780s, according to an article in the *Sunday Times Advertiser* in Trenton on October 7, 1979. Catherine Covenhoven, wife of John Covenhoven, who owned the easternmost farm in Blawenburg, put an ad in the local paper in hopes of retrieving her stolen cow and she reported it missing from Blawenburgh. (It was common to spell Blawenburg with an H on the end at that time. We aren't sure if the ad paid off.

No one officially named Blawenburg, and its official spelling evolved. People needed a name for the area and started using the Blaw name, perhaps because it was the only business other than farms. Obviously, the name stuck.

As we can see, there are usually several backstories to any town name and Blawenburg or Blawenbirk or Blauenborough is no exception. I'm happy that the village is called Blawenburg. Who knows, if they had waited a while to name it, it might have been Blueburg! That would be sad.

Blawenburg Fact: Blawenburg is the only village or town in the United States so named.

Looking Ahead: 6. The Original Houses of Blawenburg: The Nevius Homestead

Sources:

Consistory Minutes, Harlingen Reformed Church, April 29, 1802 (Shared by Lynda Pullen)

Lawton, Cassandra, *Tiny Blawenburg is Struggling for Recognition as Historic Spot*, Sunday Times Advertiser, Trenton, NJ, October 7, 1979

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belle_Mead,_New_Jersey#History